In a study of the Romantic legacy in contemporary Irish poetry, Edna Longley has noted that 'we can learn a great deal about a poet from the people he celebrates'\(^1\). While this truth has implications for our appreciation of a large number of writers, in an Irish context it has particular relevance to the poetry of Paul Durcan. Like several of his contemporaries, notably Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, Durcan has paid tribute to an eclectic range of mentors and exemplars, Irish and otherwise. Durcan's catalogue, although inclusive enough to list figures as diverse as Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan and Andrei Tarkovsky, is headed up by four key 'masters'. In their work and in their persons, Francis Bacon, R.P. Kitaj, Patrick Kavanagh and Francis Stuart have provided directives which continue to shape the style and guide the focus of Durcan's poetry. He has acknowledged their importance in poems of praise and commemoration,\(^2\) and his discernment of parallels between their methods has revealed much about his own aesthetic.\(^3\)

It is clear from these 'celebrations' that Durcan has in mind something more than a simple show of respect or admiration. What is implied is a 'visionary fit', an identification of attitude and approach, particularly as regards the role of the artist. This acts as a source of confirmation while providing a springboard for the making of a singularly original poetry. One might say that Durcan eludes the anxiety of influence while absorbing the confirmation of confluence.

Durcan's inheritance from Kavanagh is overt and pervasive;\(^4\) those features he has absorbed from Stuart are more subtle, yet equally various and dynamic. Durcan's regard for Stuart, and his irritation at his neglect by reviewers and academics, is made plain in an early reference
to him as ‘the finest living writer not only in Ireland but in the whole of the English-speaking world’. In Durcan’s opinion, ‘not until he is dead will he receive even the minimal recognition he is due’. His recent introduction to the republished Redemption continues to commend Stuart’s prose as a fiction of ‘risk-taking’, ‘brilliant but anti-mechanical, awkward, dangerous mountain-climbing’ complemented by ‘calm, measured inquiry into the fundamental question of human existence’.6

Apart from tributes, however, a number of shared themes, values and qualities in the writing point up Durcan’s imaginative identification with Stuart. Underpinning this alliance is the common conviction that the writer must challenge the oppressive orthodoxies of church, state, gender and class in favour of all that is ordinary, sensual, vulnerable, human, that as a social visionary it is his duty to attack conformity and materialism, to be original, non-establishment, dissident. Durcan would agree with H’s claim in Black List, Section H that ‘a poet must be a countercurrent to the flow around him. That’s what poetry is: the other way of feeling and looking at the world’7, and his poems are testimony to Stuart’s assertion that ‘the more mobile the consciousness in taking up new and often precarious viewing positions, the better equipped it is to achieve understanding’.8

To a large extent Durcan’s praxis has exemplified Stuart’s definition of the ‘writer of dissent’ who ‘from the very nature of his own attitude will go counter to the assumptions of many of his readers’, who will inevitably yet necessarily exist outside his community, suffering loneliness and pain in order to cultivate that ‘redeeming element’, the imagination.9 Stuart’s own life has been an enactment of this pattern; that he regards Durcan as fulfilling the same role is confirmed by the identification of him as a ‘poet-prophet’ in the line of Wordsworth and Kavanagh who possesses ‘a fierce innocence of vision and an equally fierce denunciation of godlessness, greed and comfortable complacency’, who is ‘vulnerable not just to personal experience but to all kinds of pain around him’.10

In his fiction Stuart repeatedly centralises individuals who endure the circumstances of the dissident artist. His protagonists’ rebellious
immersions in alternative physical, geographic and psychic states, their apprehension of other realities when placed in extreme situations, are crucial to imaginative growth and spiritual transformation. Experiences of loss and redemption, exile and return, suffering and vision produce, for Stuart, enduring faith in the self, the imagination, art. Similar imperatives are implicit in many of Durcan's narratives. We might think, for example, of poems like 'The Haulier's Wife Meets Jesus on the Road Near Moone', 'Going Home to Russia', or 'A Snail In My Prime', where the speakers achieve a transcendent, sustaining vision after suffering years of ostracism, isolation, and derision.

The difficulty of maintaining the commitment to a personal vision, particularly in the Republic of Ireland, is played out by many of Durcan's personae who, like the majority of Stuart's protagonists, are frequently outcasts, risk-takers, visionaries, teachers. Figures such as Sid Vicious, Marguerite, Teresa, the Harpist or Polycarp are versions of what Durcan has described as Stuart's 'true artist', one who 'must not only pass through but constantly inhabit on his, or her, own, a continual dark night of the soul'. For Stuart, Christ is the prototypical loner/visionary, the artist whose revolutionary though largely unregarded message bears the potential to heal the sick community which ironically despises and denies him. That Durcan regards 'the protagonist of the New Testament' from the same perspective is clear from his claim that Christ 'is by definition a socialist', and his life the paradigm: 'the acceptance of loss and death, the refusal to take out insurance policies, the challenge to all of us to leave home, to go on journeys'. Through his maligned, beatific hero/ines Durcan, like Stuart, has championed the radically Christian values of charity, piety and the achievement of sanctity through suffering, virtues epitomised in the figure of Christ, who makes exemplary appearances in two major narratives, 'The Haulier's Wife Meets Jesus on the Road Near Moone' and 'Six Nuns Die in Convent Inferno', as well as in several of the poems after paintings. Comparably, in 'The Divorce Referendum, Ireland, 1986', an outraged communicant identifies with Christ in the Temple when the priest substitutes ideology for prayer:
I could feel my breastplate tighten and my shoulderblades quiver;
I knew the anger that Jesus Christ felt
When he drove from the temple the traders and stockbrokers.

I say unto you, preacher and orators of the Hierarchy,
Do not bring ideology into my house of prayer.14

In this instance the poet-speaker’s reforming impulse appears as a fulfilment of H’s prophetic musings in *Black List*:

Christ had held the most forward position of his time for several hours. And it would fall to the condemned, the sick- unto-death and perhaps a handful of unregarded artists to defend these areas of consciousness in the coming days as best they could.15

There are other shared themes and preoccupations – for instance, the reworking of Biblical reference; the veneration of women; the association of erotic and religious impulses; the implications of imprisonment; the contrast between science and mysticism – which reinforce this notion of a ‘visionary fit’ and some of these will be discussed in detail later. What finally connects Durcan and Stuart, however, is what might paradoxically be called their ‘committed ambivalence’ to the island of Ireland. While it may be true to say that both writers remain essentially concerned with individual psychologies over and above social realities, Durcan’s vision of alternative spaces (most notably a Utopian Russia), which stand as correctives to the restrictive politics of the Republic of Ireland, has its correlative in Stuart’s pessimistic view of Irish life and his deep-seated belief in the need for the regeneration of Western social structures. In this context Stuart’s assertion that ‘it is only those few writers capable of imagining alternative societies who can enter into a serious and mutually advantageous relationship with their own’16, in turn qualified by the recognition that ‘being deeply critical of it, their society fears to enter into a dialogue with them’, may be set alongside two key statements by Durcan. In ‘Going Home To Russia’ the speaker, an ‘Irish dissident’ who ‘knows that in Ireland
scarcely anybody is free/To work or to have a home or to read or write', is preparing to step 'from godlessness into faith' when he sets foot on Russia. The necessity for positing alternative societies, however contentious, however one names them is, for Durcan, essential:

The quest for the 'other place'... enables us to be freer, no longer captive to our island. It also encourages us to struggle for peace in our first and literal home. You see things when you return from the journey that you had not seen before. You are filled with new outrages, new dreams.

These co-ordinates summarise the extent to which Durcan's vision converges with Stuart's. At the same time they suggest, as Gerald Dawe has pointed out, that for Durcan Stuart has acted as a bridge between the Irish world and the European experience, liberating him into the possibilities of other traditions and affording him the 'creative space' required to write poems like Ark of the North and 'The Toll Bridge', poems dedicated to Francis Stuart and in keen dialogue with his fiction and philosophy. Both poems were composed to mark the occasions of Stuart's eightieth and ninetieth birthdays on 28th April 1982 and 1992 respectively; however, for the purposes of this essay I will consider only the earlier poem in detail. As well as honing Durcan's skill in reinventing familiar images and storylines, and developing his control of allusion and irony, Ark of the North consists of what John Jordan has rightly described as 'an imaginative gloss on the work of Francis Stuart'. Not only does it improvise upon themes and interests prevalent in Stuart's life and writing, building an intricate network of private and literary connections; it also concludes by describing an aesthetic which, while confluent with many of Stuart's precepts regarding art and the artist, is nevertheless original with Durcan.

As a companion piece to Stuart's collection of poetry We Have Kept the Faith, Ark of the North projects its narrative out of the context of several of the poems in Stuart's volume. Part 1 introduces the first-person narrator, a man contemplating 'the woman of my dreams', whose likeness - 'A black-and-white photograph of an Egyptian woman/At Drogheda Railway Station on All Souls' Day' - graces his enamel windowsill alongside a single book, The Life of Buster Keaton, and 'a bro-
ken looking-glass fixed-up in splints with pencils'. These details disclose something of the speaker's character and condition (he is lonely, poor, romantic, a clown bewildered by some vaudevillean twist of fate), but it is not until the final section of the poem that we learn he is in fact the 'CORK MANIAC', 'a self-confessed hack, and poet to boot' (Ark 22) now serving thirty years in Portlaoise Prison for the murder of an Egyptian woman in Drogheda. On one level the poem is all carnival, rife with slapstick humour and mocking self-parody, but against the comedy plays a sadder, deeply serious current.

Time shifts from 9 a.m. in the present to 8.45 on that fateful morning in the past, as the narrator remembers arriving in the rain at Belfast Central Station where, in the queue for the train to Dublin, he finds himself next to a stunningly beautiful young Arab woman – appropriately named 'Defiance' – with whom he ends up sharing a compartment. The journey on the 'Enterprise' is a voyage of discovery that takes the narrator 'out of this world', their brief but ecstatic encounter climaxing in a moment of metaphysical love-making. With her sudden departure from the train at Drogheda, the narrator is devastated and, as she crosses the platform towards the exit, 'I stood up and clicked the Kodak Instamatic;/She clasped her hand on her heart as if shot' (Ark 20).

That the narrator is a prisoner, and that the 'flashback' which he recounts is itself 'imprisoned', or 'framed', by his present confinement (the mise en scène for parts I and X) gains point when set against four of Stuart's poems. 'The Prisoner 1' and 'The Prisoner 2' both consider states of isolation and imprisonment: in the first, the absent beloved is equated with Christ as the speaker experiences the horror of 'eternity now' - 'choking on time/That does not pass'; the second is more hopeful, the prisoner envisioning the (still absent) beloved as a source of salvation and rejuvenation — 'Your body is the healing cross, / Flowering, without nails' (Faith 34). Despite the difference in tone, both poems express the need of a vulnerable, suffering individual for the intervention of a compassionate, rejuvenating presence, which in both Stuart and Durcan is frequently female. The speaker's imprisonment, while it may reflect on Stuart's internment in Maryborough
Military Prison and his post-war detention in Bregenz and Freiburg by French occupation forces, describes the condition of the artist awaiting the return visitation of the beloved/muse, trying to make the connection which will spark creativity and restore psychic health. Durcan's protagonist, as we shall see, faces precisely this dilemma.

An earlier piece by Stuart, 'Criminals', tells of a man who loved a woman so passionately he murdered her in a mock crucifixion: "'I tied her to a cross, and on the third day/She descended into Hell, but she shall rise/To the sea's edge again and rot away'" (Faith 29). Daniel Murphy has noted how the symbol of the cross, paradoxically associating erotic with religious passion, introduces a theme sustained throughout Stuart's fiction.24

In Durcan's poem the beloved is 'murdered' with a Kodak Instamatic, a fact which heightens the parody hinted at in Stuart's poem, while the climax echoes, and to some extent clarifies, his synthesis of physical and spiritual energies. In a broader sense, 'Criminals' sets the tone for other concerns shared by Durcan, namely the way in which society is often more cruel and irrational than those it labels criminal, and how excess of love, like excess of knowledge, can lead to banishment from the community.

The final poem in We Have Kept the Faith, entitled 'IT WAS IN THE EVENING PAPER', provides what is perhaps the most direct source for the storyline of Ark of the North. Cast as a dialogue between a man and the woman he must tell of her lover's imprisonment, it offers a peculiarly Durcanesque glimpse of the nightmare of separation, isolation, uncertainty:

- IT WAS IN THE EVENING PAPER
- WHAT DID THEY GET?
- LIFE

- Excuse me, been waiting long?
- Oh, so long, but not for you.
- They sentenced him this afternoon.
- They what?
— He said to tell you
— Tell me what?
— About your tryst that he can’t keep,
   Not for twenty years or more.

I left her at the bus stop,
Waiting, waiting...
For a chariot of fire
Drawn by a black monster.

(*Faith 47*)

In Durcan’s poem, the waiting woman and the prisoner will merge in the narrator, a man condemned to the service of his defiant vision.

That particular poems in *We Have Kept the Faith* suggest a framework for *Ark of the North* is part of a web of allusion and association that links the poem to Stuart and identifies it as a tribute to him. The most overt, but also the most complex, of these is a reference in part VI to ‘a man in Berlin’ who ‘in the year of my birth . . . Scored a poem – composed a lyric /Known as Ireland 1944’ (*Ark* 17). Stuart’s poem ‘Ireland’, printed in *We Have Kept the Faith*, was indeed written in Berlin in 1944, the year that Paul Durcan was born in Dublin:

Over you falls the sea light, festive yet pale
As though from the trees hung candles alight in a gale

To fill with shadows your days, as the distant beat
Of waves fill the lonely width of many a western street.
Bare and grey and hung with berries of mountain ash,
Drifting through ages with tilted fields awash,
Steeped with your few lost lights in the long Atlantic dark,
Sea-birds’ shelter, our shelter and ark.

(*Faith 35*)
From his first glimpse of the Egyptian woman the narrator describes her in terms which echo 'Ireland': 'her pale face, festive yet gaunt' (*Ark* 10), 'her sand dunes; seagrass' (*Ark* 12), her 'looking away/At the tilted fields awash round the shores of Lough Neagh' (*Ark* 13); she is a 'Seabird' (*Ark* 11), a water-woman, her 'Delineation demolished by a cloudy sea' (*Ark* 17). Stuart's poem is an apostrophe to Ireland, the island figured as a vision of light 'steeped...in the long Atlantic dark', a female presence, at once beloved, maternal and ancient, exotic and familiar, metonymical of planet earth, 'our shelter and ark' (*Faith* 35). The image of Ireland as a kind of geographic aisling is translated in Durcan's poem into the appearance of the poet's Egyptian muse. Just as Stuart's Ireland is both an actual location and a state of mind, a way of seeing, so is this woman real (a potential 'bomber' who deserts without warning) and illusory (a 'way out', abstract Arabian) – it depends on how you look at her. And look at her is about all the narrator can do.

*Ark of the North* is fundamentally concerned with methods and limits of perception, in particular visual perception. Filmic metaphors proliferate, and the atmosphere which defines the narrator's vision is evoked in part I via reference to Carne's *Les Enfants du Paradis* and Camus' *Black Orpheus*. Appropriately, his initial glance of 'Defiance' is one long close-up tilt from toe to head. While he senses 'Her unease at being looked at' and tries 'to keep my eyes/From violating her', 'She haunts me wh'er e I lay down my eyes' (*Ark* 12). Durcan's register of the colonising effect of the male gaze makes of the speaker someone who, while he may see himself as a man in a movie, knows he is Buster Keaton and not John Wayne, and whose 'feminine soul' encourages the woman to return his stare with defiant, 'three-pronged gentleness' (*Ark* 13). Their silent 'confiance' involves a cinematic special effect, a kind of spatial/temporal dislocation, in which 'Space remains space, but time is no longer time' (*Ark* 12) and 'the windows of heaven were opened' (*Ark* 14):

The silence expanded until the 3-dimensional world
Fell away from us - like the earth from a spaceship -
And in the tilted fields awash the trees hung upside down,
Like multi-coloured umbrellas upturned to dry out in the
sun. (Ark 15)

'[T]ilted fields awash' sends us back to Stuart's poem, where Ireland
'drifting through ages' is like Earth seen by the 'astronaut' on board the
starship Enterprise, 'a blur- of feathers,/Peacock Feathers' (Ark 12).
The result is simultaneously expanded and imploded consciousness, a
Stuartesque moment of transformative shock and illumination before
'the guillotine' falls and re-entry into the space-time continuum is
begun.

In the seconds prior to 'execution', however, the narrator's 'last
thoughts' consist of making the connection between Stuart's poem:

Whose eight lines survive their own perfection:
Eight lines written in rhyming couplets,
The rhymes being invisible on the written page.

and the woman sitting across from him:

That she in all her life, her movement, and her being,
All in whose nostrils is the breath of life,
Is – in proportion – perfection in the eyes of God
And she survives her own perfection
In spite of priestesses and priests (Ark 17)

Embedded in Durcan's praise for 'Ireland' is the aesthetic which
informs his writing. The crux of the poem lies in the claim that 'her
delineation like the poem's rhymes/Became imperceptible when you
looked into her lips' (Ark 17), with its suggestion that perfection,
whether in life or art, is not a thing that can be fixed or defined; the
vision is fluid, multivalent, effectively imperceptible. To try to pin it
down, as the poet does when he clicks the shutter on his Kodak
Instamatic, is not just to 'capture' but to kill the thing one loves, to
betray the very purpose of art.
There is more than a hint of the primitive's superstition that the camera steals the soul in all of this. Mechanical reproduction is too easy; true 'realism' demands authentic rendering, in other words abstraction, of the imagined. What the narrator will ultimately recognise is that, as a poet, his crime lies in thinking one can reproduce life as art, that our survival as humans depends on faithfulness to, and faith in, the vision. For this reason he will condemn himself to a life spent 'getting it right', becoming a devotee of the muse who teaches that defiance of the deadly assumptions of the status quo equals survival. Read as a meditiation on the artist's struggle to keep the faith in the strengths of his own imagination, Ark of the North constitutes Durcan's (self-)portait of Stuart's dissident writer.

The poem's title radiates connections with Stuart. Ark of the North is a conflation of the three place-names which make up the substance of the minimalist conversation between Defiance and the narrator. The apparently arbitrary conjunction of Gap of the North, Arc de Triomphe and Gare du Nord, apart from contributing a euphonic internal litany, reinforces connections between the local and the exotic – Belfast / Paris aligning with Ireland in the light of Egypt – and again alludes to Stuart, that 'long-distance flyer', whose periods of residence in the North, the Republic, France and elsewhere make him a citizen of Durcan's non-sectarian, pluralist Utopia. It is perhaps worth noting that in an early review of Durcan's poetry Stuart remarked that he visualised the location for 'Sally', 'a dirty cafeteria in a railway station', as 'the Gare du Nord in Paris, except that it is not dirty'.25 'Sally' also outlines a 'brief encounter' between a man and a woman, and Durcan may well have positioned the reference to the Gare du Nord as an additional nod in Stuart's direction.

The trope of Ireland as ark, which carries so much weight at the close of Stuart's poem, is here metamorphosed into the Belfast-Dublin train, that safe space/time capsule in which the narrator finds reason to trust in 'Two and two of all flesh/Wherein is the breath of life' (Ark 121). The train-as-ark, travelling as it is from Northern Ireland to the Republic, may be taken to represent Stuart's own 'journey of faith' from North to South, from adolescence into adulthood. Less specula-
tive is that the ark is a key image in two of Stuart's novels, *Pigeon Irish* and *Memorial*, where transformative experience makes the central characters aware of a new covenant. *Ark of the North*, however, is clearly Durcan's 'rewriting' of *Memorial*, in which the aging writer Sugrue is revitalised by the muse/redeemer Herra who, like Defiance, brings him Christ-like inspiration before her death. In both works the necessity for the artist's faith in his vision is equated with Noah's trust in God's providence. Sugrue's speculations while thinking about the Biblical account of the Flood might just as easily belong to Durcan's Portlaoise prisoner:

After years of silent listening for signals coming from outside the circumscribed one of my mind, have some really reached me at certain times? Are they what impelled me to unreasonable risks and excesses, are they guiding us now?26

The re-enactment of Biblical narratives, so prevalent in Stuart's fiction, also finds its place in Durcan's poetry, and in *Ark of the North* forms part of the tribute to Stuart. While the Flood story establishes a primary pattern, Durcan directs it so as to highlight Stuart's presence in the poem and to set out his own views in typically comic-ironic guise. For example, part IV opens with the narrator's declaration that 'this world is a haunt... And an ark – above all, an ark: / The Haunted Ark' (*Ark* 12). That this is a 'coded message/Chagalled on the memo pad / Beside the telephone inside my ear' might corroborate the notion that this is all taking place in the narrator's head, that his skull is itself the 'haunted ark'; at the same time, the world as haunted ark resonates with the Joycean nightmare of history, particularly given the Northern Irish context. Either reading would render a Kafkaesque portrait of late twentieth-century man, anxious, alienated, alone, but tempered by the symbol of the ark, with its promise of salvation and renewal.

A short time later, the narrator day-dreams about 'a bestseller' entitled *The Haunt and the Haunted* 'by Adam and Eve:/Garden of Eden Publications: Published by God, Lucifer, Co:/At the Sign of the 32
Palm Trees, Dublin 1 – /Down along the quays at the Halfpenny Bridge' (*Ark 13*). Here the Flood story has metamorphosed into autobiography, expropriating another Biblical narrative to tell of humankind's lot on Earth the ('Haunt'), 'haunted' by the memory of life before the fall. Both scenarios are obviously analogous to the narrator's predicament; like the presence of the ark in the first, the second is leavened by the informal documentation, in particular the 'fact' that the book's publisher is located at approximately the same spot as the Winding Stair bookshop, a favourite 'haunt' of both Durcan and Stuart.

One of the things the narrator would like to say to his muse, 'but of course I can not', is that

Francis of Assissi was a man who had no hang-ups
About wearing a leather belt with a silver buckle
And employing it as a clothes-line cum handbag cum sheath
Cum handbag cum sheath cum noticeboard:
O he was a wild bird, tame as a redbreast:
He was a long-distance flyer, yet he travelled light
And he had a key to every cabin and castle from Australia to
Antrim. (*Ark 13*)

Durcan's affectionate canonisation of Stuart is more than apt for there are certain correspondences between Francis and his namesake: the crucial experience of being a prisoner of war; the time spent in religious contemplation; the close identification with Christ on the Cross. Durcan's sketch manages to laud Stuart's liberalism, generosity, cosmopolitanism, and poetic dexterity as well as allude to the course of his family history, and concludes by marking him as the same sad but honest realist as Cait Killan, 'The Girl With the Keys to Pearse's Cottage', or Galya, 'The Woman With the Keys to Stalin's House'.

The flip side to this cameo appearance is the caricature of Stuart as, punitiously, 'A Steward of the Turf Club of Ireland' (*Ark 19*). His arrival in part VIII coincides with the departure of Defiance and the narrator's return to the 'clamorous', distinctly unglamorous environs of the rat-
tling coach. Their meeting is pure farce, sheer carnival, a comic inversion of the intense encounter which has just concluded. Moses Basket, as the Steward is ludicrously but fittingly named (for, however ironically, this will prove a moment of cradling, a vital leg on the journey into the 'promised land'), is a chatty, unwelcome replacement ('He had already sat down opposite me / (Where she had been)') (*Ark* 19), a combination Ulster Prod ('black bowler hat', 'cavalry twill trousers') and Anglo-Irish toff ('tweed brown-and-white sportsjacket', 'bog-brown' tie and socks), who is blatantly insensitive to the narrator's romantic sensibility: 'He uttered the word pleasure as if it were a fence in a steeple-chase / And he was a horse kneeing his way through it' (*Ark* 19). What resolves their differences and has them gossiping together 'like two girls discussing a boy' is their mutual appreciation for 'the beauty of Lester Piggott'. Stuart's love of the track and Durcan's admiration of Piggott's technique elide in the narrator's seemingly incongruous announcement, "'Horses are heartbreaking'" (*Ark* 19).

That point of contact is matched by the stanza, 'Music? Pluck it – from out of the air. / Pluck music from out of the air', with its echoes of Shakespeare, Congreve and, in particular Pater (whose dictum 'All art aspires towards the condition of music' remains one of Durcan's touchstones). The thought appears to belong to the narrator, who at this point is acutely aware of its irony and its veracity; at the same time, though, the ambiguous allocation of the lines suggests that they may in fact be a sobering, instructive missive from master to acolyte. The convergence operates in somewhat the same way as the narrator's desperate location at the opening of part X ('In Dublin in a cafe near O'Connell Street Bridge,/10,000 times more forsaken than East Berlin' (*Ark* 22)), itself a conflation of Stuart's two 'homelands', resolves at the close of the poem into the brilliant, inspired vision of the muse as 'a Vase of Fuschia in a Hacienda of Night' (*Ark* 23). In this incisive acknowledgement of the thin line between despair and inspiration, between death and survival, lies the basic connection between Durcan and Stuart.

This kind of communion cum identification defines Durcan's response to Stuart in *Ark of the North*. The poem's definition of the
position of the artist in Irish society and its ‘committed ambivalence’ towards Ireland, its elaboration of an aesthetic and its deft evolution of metaphor and narrative are all grounded in an affectionate but discriminating appreciation of Stuart’s work and person. Ten years later, Durcan’s tribute to Stuart on his ninetieth birthday would build on the rich complexity of Ark of the North. Like Ark of the North, ‘The Toll Bridge’ sustains the ‘visionary fit’ and continues the dialogue between the Ringsend Hermit and the Dundrum Magician: ‘talking to him was like talking to one of the old masters’.28

ENDNOTES


3 See, for example, the following articles by Durcan: ‘Francis Bacon’, Cork Examiner, 2 July 1979: ‘Bacon has shown that it is possible to use traditional methods to evoke uniquely the particularity of his own era: Francis Stuart, in prose, has achieved a similar feat’; ‘A Man of Mind’, Cork Examiner, 29
In terms of twentieth century Irish writing Kavanagh . . . should be seen in relation to Beckett, O’Riordain and Stuart, particularly Stuart, whose deep religious sensibility, together with extreme verbal flexibility, is akin to Kavanagh’s; ‘Interviewing Bacon’, Cork Examiner, 24 February 1981: ‘[David Sylvester’s interviews with Francis Bacon] rank with the letters of Van Gogh, the essays of R.B. Kitaj, and the writings of Francis Stuart. . . . Like Stuart, Bacon has always been a great risk-taker. Like Stuart again, the mystery of the person in a place has always been at the heart of his work, never more so than in the last decade.

In other words, Bacon’s views – reached of course independently in his own hermitage in Paris – coincide identically with those of Kitai and Stuart. Like them he has no time for abstract art; he would agree with me that the phrase ‘abstract art’ is a contradiction in terms. What all three share in both their art and words is a belief in a return to the figure-concentration of the Old Masters as the only path towards – to use Pound’s vital dictum – ‘making it new’. Bacon shares with Kitai and Stuart an outrageous honesty which in the world of art and literature so choc-a-bloc with chicanery, double-facer, wheeler-dealing, cant and pretentiousness) is as uncommon as laughter in a morgue. . . . [Bacon’s] belief in the function of distortion is akin to Stuart and Kitai. . . .’


12 In the 1975 interview with J.H. Natterstad cited above, page 19, Stuart comments: ‘Well, I think the figure of Christ at the crucifixion, and before it, is also a symbol of the utter loneliness of the artist, a loneliness achieved by his condemnation and ostracism. For us at least in the West, I think Christ does to a large extent constitute a prototype of the artist completely isolated and without support – I mean without any communal or moral or political or social support.’


20 As part of the plans for a celebration of Stuart’s eightieth birthday, Dermot Bolger of Raven Arts Press commissioned Durcan to write a long poem in honour of the occasion. Durcan composed *Ark of the North*, which was published by Raven Arts. At the same
time, Raven Arts reissued, with 14 additional poems, Stuart’s 1923 collection *We Have Kept the Faith*, originally published by the Oak Leaf Press in Dublin under the name H. Stuart. An evening in Stuart’s honour was celebrated at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin on 28 April 1982, at which he was presented with a copy of *Ark of the North* on behalf of Raven Arts Press and friends. This was followed by Durcan’s recital of the poem, and Stuart’s reading of selections from *We Have Kept the Faith*.

To mark Stuart’s ninetieth birthday, Durcan recited ‘The Toll Bridge’ at a reading in the Peppercanister Church, Upper Mount Street, Dublin, on 29 April 1992.


22 Paul Durcan, *Ark of the North* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1982), p.7. All subsequent references to this text will be cited within the essay as *Ark*.

23 Francis Stuart, *We Have Kept the Faith* (1923; Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1982), p.33. All subsequent references to this text will be cited in the essay as *Faith*.


I felt ill waiting for him to answer the door;
As it happened, on that particular night, dejected.
But talking to him was like talking to one of the old masters
If you can envisage the old masters as being Japanese
   - The red horse at the black well –
   - The boy on the mountain –
   - The sea in flower –
And I came away from him with bunches of new skates in both hands.
Arrow of Anguish

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